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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 000055

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: FIRE IN TAJIK ORPHANAGE RAISES QUESTIONS

1. (U) At least 13 disabled children died when a fire destroyed Chorbogh orphanage early January 8. Neighbors pulled children out of the burning Dushanbe facility, home to almost 100 mentally and physically disabled children. Many victims were bedridden and unable to escape. Metal bars on the windows may have prevented the children from exiting the building. Tajik authorities are investigating the cause, thought initially to stem from electrical wiring overloaded by heaters during a cold snap. The evacuated children are now residing in a Dushanbe school.

2. (SBU) Media reported the fire department was extremely slow to respond and residents of nearby homes performed most of the rescue operations. Embassy staff heard rumors the fire and rescue squads needed more than 40 minutes to travel two miles, and then arrived without water in the truck tanks. More sinister but unsubstantiated rumors suggest the fire was intentional, to vacate the state-owned children's home and free up valuable property close to the city center.

3. (SBU) PolOff visited the home December 26 and found the facility to be shabby but clean, similar to other Tajik educational facilities. During the surprise visit, children were grouped in dorm rooms by age, bathed and dressed, but not involved in any educational activities or therapy. Another EmbOff familiar with Tajik orphanages called Chorbogh one of the worst, in terms of staff negligence and quality of care.

4. (U) COMMENT: Home fires in Tajikistan are fairly common, particularly in the winter when gas and electric heaters provided only limited warmth in buildings with outdated wiring and decaying wood. Post sincerely hopes this tragedy resulted from negligence, and not something more disturbing. Post is organizing donations from Embassy personnel to help surviving orphans.

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